

Lithuanians Try to Keep a Stiff Upper Lip

Soviet Squeeze Prompts Defiance—and Reflection

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VILNIUS, U.S.S.R.—Ever since Lithuanian authorities started rationing gasoline last week, black marketeers at the open-air bazaar on the edge of town have been doing a roaring trade, even though they risk two years in jail and fines up to \$8,000 if they are caught.

One afternoon, six of them chat and joke by their cars, falling silent as a burly Russian with a walrus moustache approaches. "How much?" he asks.

"Seventy," one replies.

That's ridiculous, says the Russian, a foreman at a local furniture factory. "Two days ago, it cost 50." The black marketeer shrugs and turns back to his colleagues. "That's what happens if Lithuania gets independence," the Russian mutters, walking away empty-handed. "Prices will go up every half hour."

The Price of Defiance

Seven weeks after Lithuania's elected parliament declared independence, the people of this tiny Baltic republic are beginning to pay the price. As economic sanctions imposed by Moscow start to bite, gasoline at \$25 a gallon is a taste of further hardship. Ten thousand people are out of jobs or taking unpaid leaves, and tens of thousands more could become unemployed as factories close because of shortages of fuel and parts.

In Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and other Soviet republics, people would riot over less. But so far, most Lithuanians display a calm bordering on stoicism. They are proud of their government's defiance of Moscow, and insist they are prepared to suffer for it. Just beneath the surface, however, lurks a nagging feeling of uncertainty as many now quietly admit that what started out as a fairy tale might not have a happy ending.

"People just don't know what will happen next," says Ona Matulioniene, a 72-year old pensioner who spent eight years in a Siberian prison camp after the Soviets annexed Lithuania in 1940. "How will our children and grandchildren live?"

'Vindictive' Soviet Attitude

Last week, the Vilnius plastics plant where Mrs. Matulioniene works as a part-time cleaner sent a truckload of piping to a customer in Leningrad. When the driver arrived, filling stations there took one look at his Lithuanian license plates and refused to fill his tank. "The Soviets aren't gentlemen," says Gintautas Andriunas, an official at the plant. "It's rather ridiculous."

The government thinks so, too. As it scrambles to find ways to beat the blockade, it is sending out a cheerful, upbeat message. Rather than venting anger at Mikhail Gorbachev, officials prefer to gently ridicule his strong-arm tactics.

"Whoever gave orders for an economic blockade of Lithuania should be nominated for one of the republic's major awards," says Romualdas Ozolas, the deputy prime minister. "A new economic system is being formed in Lithuania."

(Yesterday, however, there was a conciliatory signal from Moscow. The Associated Press quoted Vilnius Radio as saying that the Soviet Union unexpectedly eased part of its economic blockade against Lithuania, almost doubling the amount of natural gas flowing to the republic.)

Calling All Republics

In the absence of a compromise with Moscow—and of support from the West—the Lithuanians are pinning their hopes on potential allies in the other Soviet republics. Managers and government officials are busy contacting suppliers and customers throughout the union, hoping to establish direct trade ties that circumvent



the central planners in Moscow. Vilnius says it would even be prepared to pay hard currency for Soviet supplies of oil.

"I'm sure the blockade will resolve itself in a happy way for Lithuania and the Soviet Union, too," Mr. Ozolas says. "Of course," he adds, "I'm a philosopher, not an economist."

The government, in fact, has more than its fair share of academics, starting with President Vytautas Landsbergis, a rumpled music professor. At times, occupying the moral high ground can seem just as important to them as surviving the nail-biting battle of nerves with Moscow.

Emerging from a lengthy session of the government's anti-blockade commission, Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene is collared by a Lithuanian journalist who has a couple of tricky suggestions. During World War II, Hitler forged British money in an effort to destabilize its economy. Why doesn't Lithuania do the same to the Soviet Union, the journalist asks. And why doesn't it ask Lithuanian women to donate their wedding rings to be melted down and sold abroad for precious hard currency?

Mrs. Prunskiene, a 47-year old economist dubbed Lithuania's Margaret Thatcher, grins. Lithuania would rather print its own currency, she says. As for the rings, "Lithuanian men aren't going to let women donate all their jewelry."

Chin-Up Disposition

Behind the scenes, the Lithuanians can be pragmatists. Officials have spent two weeks knocking on doors in Moscow, signaling a willingness to compromise on at least part of their independence declaration. Though they refuse to tear it up, there is talk of a suspension in return for the start of formal independence negotiations. The chances of a diplomatic solution along these lines received a boost after West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President Francois Mitterrand of France made a similar plea over the weekend.

Hard-line Lithuanian activists reject any retreat from their independence drive. "It would mean jail again," complained Donatas Davicsa, a bearded campaigner from the Lithuanian Freedom League, during a small protest rally outside Parliament. As a U.S. television camera spots him, he holds up a placard, which declares: "Freedom is light for wick (sic) many have died in darkness."

Vytautas Zemaitis is less critical. He has spent an hour sitting in his battered green Moskvich auto, waiting in line for his monthly quota of seven gallons of gasoline. The blockade is "a good lesson," he says. "Self-awareness is very important." Turning effusive, he adds, "In the month we have had our independence, we have crossed out all the propaganda we have had to put up with for 40 years."

Little seems amiss during a stroll around town. There are fewer private cars than normal and buses are crammed. Several traffic lights have been switched off to save energy, but a big neon sign by the town center flashes news headlines and commercials. As ever, stores are much better stocked with food and clothes than the ones in Moscow and prices in the market haven't risen much. Though the Soviets have cut back sharply on deliveries of natural gas, which most Lithuanians use for heat and cooking, there is still enough to live on.

Who's Being Hurt More?

It's a different story at industrial plants in town. Supplies of natural gas, ball bearings and metal have been slashed at the factory that makes parts for diesel-tractor engines, forcing the shutdown of some lines. Two hundred of the 7,000 workers have taken their vacation early.

On a line churning out fuel pumps, Algis Tetravicius shouts above the din of machinery. "Of course I support Lithuanian independence," he says, wiping his hands on his grimy blue overalls. But faced with the prospect of unemployment, he has some doubts about the ability of the republic's leadership to end the crisis. "Landsbergis is not so good," he frets. "He's a philosopher."

The engine plant, however, is one reason why Mr. Landsbergis and other officials are convinced a prolonged Soviet economic blockade will backfire. It is the sole supplier of certain key parts for Soviet engines. If it stops functioning, two big tractor factories in Minsk and Vladimir will grind to a standstill, says Alfonsas Spudis, the deputy director of the plant. The Soviets won't be able to shift to imports because the parts are made to special Soviet specifications, he says.

As a result, Mr. Spudis says that even as Mr. Gorbachev tightens the economic blockade of Lithuania, the ministry for autos and tractors in Moscow is trying to break it, arranging for deliveries of key materials to the plant.

Across town, at the plastics factory, the story is similar. It sends 80% of its production to Soviet republics. Now that its energy supply has been cut drastically and deliveries of polyethylene and polystyrene have ground to a halt, the plants in the other republics won't be able to keep operating much longer.

"I don't understand politics. It's a children's game," says Mr. Andriunas, the factory official. Ironically, the few items the plant can continue producing for some time are mainly plastic containers sold in Lithuania. They include sturdy canisters for gasoline. "The trouble is," Mr. Andriunas sighs, "There's no gasoline in Lithuania."